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ABSTRACT

The puzzling quality of modern art, in both its complexity and its simplicity, symbolizes a barrier between the student and the elite's privilege of power. Too frequently, students have been taught that art is a secret, a code to which only teachers have the key, and that there is only one correct interpretation of a work, which must be imparted by some authority. This attitude can and should be changed. One strategy is to use an approach from semiotics, the concept of intertextuality. Students begin to see that a work of art is usually more than one simple sign--it is a text, an interwoven fabric of symbols. In many works, these symbols or signs may actually be other texts, hence the concept of intertextuality. A well-known painting, Picasso's "Guernica," is given a semiotic reading. (BZ)

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READING GUERNICA:

MAKING MODERN ART ACCESSIBLE TO STUDENTS

by
Nancy M. Posselt

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Reading Guernica:
Making Modern Art Accessible to Students

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Everyone who teaches an appreciation course with the basic aim of increasing students' acceptance and even enjoyment of the arts as well as their knowledge must eventually meet the same frustration: the hackneyed rejection of Van Gogh on the grounds that "My little sister could do that" (she'll make them pretty rich if she can), or of Picasso because his images aren't always pretty and decorative. Since these same students have accepted Michelangelo's David with no problem ("It's pretty, it's realistic, and we understand it!"), I have found that using an approach from semiotics, the concept of intertextuality, can be helpful in bridging the gap between the familiar and the strange in art.

I think we all recognize the reasons for our students' rejection of modern art. They feel not only that it's unfamiliar, but that somehow the elite, the privileged, know something about these strange paintings that the man and woman in the street haven't been told. They begin to wonder if there's something missing in their own intelligence, and then decide that these works are traps, like the emperor's new clothes, and that they'll only reveal their own ignorance if they attempt an interpretation. The puzzling quality of modern art, in both its complexity and its simplicity, symbolizes to many students a barrier between them and the privilege of power. Some students will react thus to all the humanities, but many more will feel it much more strongly about modern art. It's especially paradoxical to react thus to Picasso, who made his paintings strange in an attempt to break with the authoritarian elitism of tradition.

Students don't invent this misconception about art. Too frequently they've been taught that art is a secret, a code to which only teachers have the key, and that there is only one correct interpetation of a work, which must be imparted by some authority (usually a critic but occasionally a teacher—never just some viewer). I have found that this attitude can be changed. We can openly recognize it and question it, and we can teach students that they too are the owners of interpretations of art—we can empower them as viewers.

I like to begin with the simple concept of sign or symbol, to demonstate a conept from semiotics: that a sign consists of the the signfier, the visible—in the case of a stop sign, the yellow octagon—and of a signified, the understood—in the case of the stop sign, the idea of stopping. I point out that the yellow octagon is external and universal, but the idea of stopping is internal and individual. Only members of this culture give the octagon that meaning—an ancient Roman would never have guessed it. The artist supplies the signifier, but he depends on the viewer to supply the signified. With a more complex symbol, there will be a greater variety of responses—a loaf of bread to one viewer suggests the staff of life, while to another it's Wonder bread. We examine a work like the Dying Gaul and discuss the variety of responses in the class, and also discuss how differently the audiences of the time of its creation might have responded.

As we move throught the course, we begin to see that a work of art is usually more than one simple sign—it is a text, an interwoven fabric of symbols. In many works, these symbols or signs may actually be other texts (hence the concept of intertextuality). Some well-known examples are Aaron Copeland's use of folk

melodies in Appalachian Spring, Joyce's use of the Odyssey in Ulysses, and the Japanese prints in the backgrounds of Impressionist peintings. The implication for the inexperienced viewer is that whatever knowledge they have can add to their understanding and enjoyment of the work of of art. The artist and and the viewer together create the work of art, which may be richer and more interesting to viewers with more experience, but is never the possession only of the initiate. I use this series of slides to demonstrate to students at the end of a humanities or art appreciation course how the texts they've become familiar with may reapppear in a new text that may seem strange at first, but is simply a new combination of known signs and texts.

We look at Guernica first of all as composition, to make sure everyone notices the three part structure, the interplay of triangles, the complex variation of dark and light. I ask students then to give their first reaction—which is usually confusion, alienation, distrust. After a brief discussion of the occasion of the painting, its location and size, we begin to relate the picture to the works they already know.

The bull, the most dominant symbol, is an ancient archetype. We saw it first in the caves of Altamira, where it suggested the power of nature. The great antiquity of these paintings also give the bull the connotations of ancient mysteries. The Minoan Bull Dancer also adds to our associations if the bull with the massive power of nature, and the bas-relief Sacrifice from Pergamon adds an association of religious mystery, of sacrifice to the gods.

Below the bull is mother holding the dead child. This combination of cattle with mother and child recalls the innocent wonder of nativity scenes, like Fabriano's

Adoration of the Magi, or Botticelli's Nativity. We may remember also Picasso's own Madonna. Yet the association in Guernica has a bitter irony, because here the mother grieves for a dead child, rather than rejoicing in the birth of a living one. This tension between the text recalled and the present text is one of the sources of the power of this painting, like a major key theme repeated in a minor. The grieving mother recalls another image familiar from the Renaissance--the Pieta. The harsh angularity of Picasso's painting recalls most of all the medieval Pieta of Avignon, with its distortions and unsoftened raw grief, but we cannot dismiss that most famous Pieta of Michelangelo, and again the contrast between the two works emphasizes the horror Picasso creates.

Moving to the right, the second group of figures are the horse and the fallen warrior. They remind us of statuary and painting both Classical and Renaissance--the Greek Platform Horse, or Velasquez' Philip IV, for example. Students can usually supply examples from their own locale--especially in the South, where every crossroads features a monument (and here we see again the power residing in the viewer--Picasso certainly made no deliberate reference to Confederate monuments, but students who've never travelled to Greece or Rome can use the monuments they know to enrich their feeling for this symbol). Most students in introductory classes find the Dying Gaul especially appealing, and can contrast his human pathos with the distorted horror of Guernica, and begin to see that contrast as the true signified of this complex sign.

Beyond the individual figures, we can find other reminders of familiar works. The tripartite structure clearly recalls the three-art altar piece, exemplified perhaps by Rubens' Descent from the Cross, Bosch's Temptation of St. Anthony, and J. Van Eyck's Madonna w. Canon Van Der Paele, as well as many others. We

recognize the flat two dimensional figure of medieval illumination, such as St, John Hears the Voice, or Christ Washing the Feet of Peter. The distorted space, both inside and outside the buildings at once, recalls Early Reniassance experiments like the Annunciation by the Master of Flemalle and the Way to Golgotha by Martini, as well as later Cubist experiments by Picasso himself. The distortion of the figures to show feeling rather than photographically represent visual reality recalls the techniques of other cultures, like the masks of the Ivory Coast and this head from New Guinea, and especially Picasso's own Demoiselles d'Avignon.

A knowledge of the history of European art will enrich the viewing of this picture. Students familiar with Expressionism will also recall the distortions of those works. The open screaming mounths of the victims in Guernica echo Munch's Scream. We are strongly aware of Picasso's differences from other works too--the colors so markedly apparent in so many contemporary pictures (like Van Gogh's Boats of Saintes Maries) are so clearly absent here, and light, the subject of the Impressionists(as in Renoir's La Grenoillere), here is represented by a symbolic shape. Students know their own feelings about a world in which light and color are conspicuous by their absence. Students who've seen Picasso's Las Meninas understand that he sees himself as an interpreter of the special Spanish tradition of Velasquez.

In subject matter as well he continues the great tradition of another Spanish painter, Goya. Few students have responded apathetically to Goya's scenes of horror, yet they see how the presence of an identifiable destroyer, the soldiers of the Third of May, contrasts with the unseen attackers of Guernica, implying a destructiveness byond description. What Guernica signifies above all is the

horror of war, and students' knowledge and experience of the wars after 1937--WWII, the concentration camps, the Bomb, Vietnam--are equally valid responses to this text. Apocalypse is the vison Picasso conjures here, like the medieval Last Judgement of Atun, or of Michelangelo. Once again the special quality of this apocalypse of the twentieth century is emphasized by the similarity and dissimilarity of past versions of this theme. Preault uses many of the same figures in his bas-relief War, but his code, the visual language he uses to speak his words of terror, is a traditional one. Picasso emphasizes the grotesque nature of total destruction by his casting of all these traditional concepts is a visual format unique to our times. The picture is black and white, an elongated strip of distorted two-dimensional fgures, recalling most clearly the newspaper cartoon. Like Krazy Kat and Popeye, the picture is filled with chaos, movement, and violence. To reassure us that our response here is not meaningless coincidence, we look at Picasso's own cartoons of the same period--the Songes et Mesonges de Franco.

We complete our examination of responses to the text by discussing the problem of the artist's intent. When asked his own interpretation of the picture, Picasso said in 1944 that the bull represented the forces of brutality and darkness present in all men. In 1944, that response must have been close to the surface for many viewers, and Picasso's Minotaur of the same period must evoke that response. Yet Picasso often identified himself with the Minotaur, and a series of etchings also done in 1936 picture the bull-man as the erotic life force. If we return to the painting, the text itself, we may see the bull as threatening or protective. So the artist's authority is ambiguous, and we are left with our own response, the final arbiters of what Guernica signifies to us.